Review of 'If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things' (2002) by Jon McGregor

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Jon McGregor
IF NOBODY SPEAKS OF REMARKABLE THINGS
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Jon McGregor’s first novel has already been included on the long list for this year’s Booker Prize, garnered much favourable comment and marked the arrival of a potentially significant literary talent. Reviewers have been quick to draw parallels with the work of Virginia Wolfe and Dylan Thomas but there is a sense in which McGregor’s story could be seen as an Anglican or even Catholic work.

At one level the novel is about anonymity. It is set in an unnamed street in an unnamed town with characters who remain, for the most part, unidentified. This clearly presents readers with a challenge in following the interweaving narrative threads as they wind in and out of the street’s different houses but as a device it is very effective in conveying the sense of the ‘ordinary’ that the author seeks. By contrast, the novel’s chronological location is most specific. All the action takes place on the day that Princess Diana died, however this setting is only alluded to and easily missed.

McGregor’s version of that day, including another accident that draws his characters together, unfolds from several perspectives. They include the experiences of a pregnant young woman that are told in the first person, which contrasts with the third-person reportage of the lives in the unnamed street and the increasingly important brother of someone who was a neighbour to that unspecified woman on the day in question.

In addition to the unusual structure of the book, one of the most striking things about McGregor’s work is his use of simile. The narrative begins with an evocative description of the sounds in the anonymous city which he says, ‘come together and rouse like a choir, sinking and rising with the turn of the wind, the counter and solo, the harmony humming expecting more voices.’ As the book progressed I expected to tire from their overuse, but instead they continued to work well in revealing the author’s imagination and humour.

Organised religion and personal faith play little part in the lives of McGregor’s characters, which is perhaps surprising given that a key dynamic in the story is the contrast between birth and death and an understanding of ‘miracle’ is also important. However in a culture where faith of any kind is seen as somehow extraordinary, it is probably in keeping with the book’s nature that such matters do not surface here.

Yet, as I mentioned, it is also a story with a deep Anglican and Catholic resonance. In reading the novel, I found myself reflecting more than once on the words of the Anglican Priest, George Herbert, in his popular hymn Teach me, my God and King and the less well-known theological concept of the ‘sacrament of the present moment’ elaborated by the French Jesuit Jean-Pierre de Caussade. This is by no means an overtly religious novel but, in its attention to detail and by giving value to the (apparently) insignificant things of life, it reflects a valuable spiritual insight in a thoroughly modern idiom.